

Addressing Workforce Needs and Challenges in Social Services in the EU Care Strategy



(11 July 2022) On July 5th, 2022, a conference was organised in Brussels on “Addressing Workforce Needs and Challenges in Social Services to Implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Forthcoming EU Care Strategy.” The event was hosted jointly by EPSU, representing social service workers across Europe and [Federation of European Social Employers](#) (Social Employers henceforth) the representative employers organisations in the sector.

Gregor Tomschizek and Sylvian Renouvel from the Social Employers opened the conference by accentuating the urgency of addressing staff shortages in the care sector. According to their research conducted with 47 organisations in the EU care sector, 85% of those surveyed reported staff shortages. The positions of nurses face the greatest scarcity of eligible job applicants. While low wages and burdensome work are some of the obvious reasons for unfilled positions in the care sector, the problem is more complex than may strike at first.

Representatives from [Elisfa](#), a French employers' organisation, claimed that the "lack of recognition" for care workers is perhaps the most pressing problem that hasn't received sufficient attention. While care workers were applauded generously during the peak of Covid-19 pandemic, they generally report feeling not valued enough.

According to a position paper authored jointly by EPSU and Social Employers, the spike in appreciation for care work due to Covid-19 was short-lived. Making care work more attractive will require bold measures such as giving the care workers more autonomy, flexibility, clearer career paths and re-skilling opportunities. Social Dialogue is a pre-requisite for such measures. Moreover, effective campaigning may be necessary to attract more men in the care sector. Also, an integrated approach is needed wherein care-work is seen as an indispensable component of public health.

Dana-Carmen Bachmann, Head of Unit, [DG EMPL](#) (European Commission), reiterated the importance of this conference in the context of the forthcoming EU Care Strategy. Workforce issues in the Long-Term Care (LTC) sector must be addressed promptly if we are to ensure quality, affordable and personalised care for all. Bachmann highlighted that most of the care needs in the EU are currently catered to by the informal sector, i.e., by friends and family. With increasing labour force participation, such heavy reliance on family networks is not sustainable. Thus, expanding formal LTC is a priority for the Commission, for which the care sector must be made more attractive for the workers.

While concerted action is certainly needed at the EU level to address staff shortages, action at the national and organisation level is no less significant. Members of Elisfa outlined some of the effective steps already being taken by various social partners to address staff shortages. These include, for e.g., reducing

administrative barriers for employers and migrating employees, campaigns to improve the status of social service workers, psychological support for staff, greater collaboration between workplaces and schools etc.

Tina Weber, Research Manager Employment, [Eurofound](#), emphasised the importance of high-quality data collection to evaluate which policies are being effective at addressing staff shortages. Low wage levels are undeniably an important cause for the shortages. At present, Austria, Netherlands and Luxembourg are the only countries where the average wages of social services workers are almost equal to the national average. In all other EU countries, they are much lower. Having said that, it is not clear that an increase in wages alone would attract more workers to the care sector, especially in certain contexts such as the rural areas. More innovative policy tools may have to be tried and evaluated to effectively address the problem at hand.

The last session consisted of country-specific presentations on good practices by social partners from France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. All of them reiterated the importance of social dialogue in making the social services sector more attractive for workers. Adam Rogalewski, Policy Officer Health and Social Services, EPSU closed the conference by noting the need for employers and employees to work together to deliver the best possible care for the most vulnerable part of our population.

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